

## North Korea

North Korea remained one of the most repressive media environments in the world in 2014, as its leader, Kim Jong-un, sustained his efforts to solidify his grip on power. The North Korean media have continued their propaganda efforts to consolidate national unity around Kim Jong-un, who assumed the country's leadership after the death of his father and predecessor, Kim Jong-il, in December 2011. Freedom of expression in the country gained renewed attention worldwide in 2014 as the regime threatened war on the United States over a satirical Hollywood movie, *Interview*, about a fictional U.S. Central Intelligence Agency attempt to assassinate Kim. The U.S. government blamed North Korea for a subsequent cyberattack on Sony Pictures Entertainment, which released the film; the cyberattack resulted in numerous leaked e-mails.

### Legal Environment

Although the constitution theoretically guarantees freedom of speech, provisions calling for adherence to a "collective spirit" restrict in practice all reporting that is not sanctioned by the government. Under the penal code, listening to unauthorized foreign broadcasts and possessing dissident publications are considered "crimes against the state" that carry serious punishments, including hard labor, prison sentences, and the death penalty. North Koreans are often interrogated or arrested for speaking critically about the government; they also face arrest for possessing or watching television programs acquired on the black market.

### Political Environment

The one-party regime controls all domestic news outlets, attempts to regulate all communication, and rigorously limits the ability of North Korean people to access outside information. All domestic journalists are members of the ruling Korean Worker's Party (KWP), and all domestic media outlets serve as mouthpieces for the regime. In 2007, a Japanese journalist and several North Korean refugees launched *Rimjingang*, the first newsmagazine to be based on independent reporting from inside the country. The reporting is conducted by specially trained North Koreans—most of them refugees living along the border with China—who agreed to go back into the country and operate as undercover journalists using hidden cameras. A number of other news outlets based outside the country, including *Daily NK*, also provide reporting about North Korea and rely to some extent on sources based inside the country. Although reports from these outlets are easily accessible to people outside North Korea, within the country most citizens still rely primarily on state-owned broadcasting agencies for news.

In recent years there has been an increase in the flow of news and information into the country via foreign radio stations and organizations that send multimedia content across the border. For example, several Seoul-based radio stations run mainly by North Korean refugees, such as Free North Korea Radio and Radio Free Chosun, have broadcast to North Korea since the mid-2000s. According to surveys of North Korean defectors by the North Korean Human Rights Database Center, an increasing number of North Koreans have listened to foreign radio in recent years. With the growing popularity of DVD players in the country, smuggled foreign DVDs have become an important source for information about life outside North Korea. Although televisions are required to be tuned to official channels, nearly one-third of the population—mainly those living along the Chinese and South Korean borders—reported having accessed

foreign television broadcasts, according to a 2012 research report by InterMedia. The use of USB flash drives smuggled from China has also improved the flow of outside information into North Korea, although authorities actively track and punish citizens found with foreign unauthorized content.

Official North Korean media generally portray dissidents and foreign journalists as liars attempting to destabilize the government. Authorities allow very few foreign journalists to report in the country and curtail their ability to gather information by preventing them from freely talking to people on the street and constantly monitoring their movements. The regime does on occasion invite the foreign press, both individually and as a group, to cover festivals, parades, or other events that shed a favorable light on the state.

## Economic Environment

The government controls the media landscape, and independent media does not exist. The state-owned Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) supplies content to the country's 12 main newspapers, 20 periodicals, and broadcasters such as the party's Korean Central TV and Korean Central Broadcasting Station radio. *Rodong Sinmun* is the newspaper of the KWP. In a recent opening for Western media, North Korea agreed to allow the Associated Press (AP) to establish its first full-time and all-format news bureau in the country. The AP bureau, located inside the headquarters of the KCNA in Pyongyang, officially opened in January 2012 after weeks of delay following the death of Kim Jong-il. Although the AP had maintained a video bureau in North Korea since 2006, the new full-time news bureau allowed its photographers and journalists to work in the country on a regular basis, albeit under heavy restrictions. The bureau is managed from outside the country, and staffed by two North Koreans inside the country—a reporter and a photographer. This has allowed more images to emerge from North Korea, especially as some AP journalists, although not resident in the country, regularly post photographs on popular social media sites such as Instagram and Twitter. Other foreign news organizations have also opened offices in recent years, including Russia's RIA Novosti, Japan's Kyodo News, and China's Xinhua News Agency. In June 2014, Agence France-Presse (AFP) announced plans to open a bureau office in Pyongyang by the end of the year, and Reuters was also in negotiations to follow suit.

While the AP's Pyongyang bureau gives Westerners unprecedented access to the closed-off country, the organization does not have any customers in North Korea, given the absence of independent media and total control by state-run outlets. In December 2014, NKNews.org published an article, written by a former AP stringer, alleging that the AP had agreed to distribute North Korea propaganda and surrender to government censorship. The AP issued a statement the same day strongly denying the claim, and describing the article's author, Nate Thayer, as a disgruntled former employee.

There are no accurate statistics measuring the rate of internet penetration in the country, although there were reports that North Korea's already-limited access to the internet had been cut off in December 2014, days after the U.S. government accused North Korea of hacking into Sony Pictures Entertainment. The situation was unusual for the country, which has four official networks running through China to connect itself to the internet, sparking concerns of a cyberattack or retaliation by the U.S. government. The online presence of North Korean official media has increased in recent years. *Rodong Sinmun* launched a new website in February 2011, with its English-language site following within a year. The KCNA website has improved since debuting in 2010, and North Korea maintains YouTube and Twitter accounts under the name Uriminzokkiri (Our Nation). The website of the Korean Friendship Association, a major channel for promoting propaganda abroad, offers multimedia content and includes links to major social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Beginning in February 2013, North Korea allowed foreigners visiting or

living in the country access to the internet from their mobile devices via a 3G network run by Koryolink. Reporters for the AP and Xinhua in North Korea were some of the first foreigners to use the service. The decision regarding the mobile internet service came shortly after North Korea began allowing foreigners to bring their own cellphones into the country to use with Koryolink SIM cards.

These new connections, however, have little significance for most North Korean citizens. Global internet access is still restricted to a handful of high-level officials who have received state approval, though increasing numbers of academic scientists and students are also permitted controlled internet access. Ordinary citizens are granted access only to a national intranet that does not link to foreign sites. The Korea Computer Center, a government information-technology research center, controls the information that can be downloaded from the intranet. As personal computers are uncommon in homes, most access occurs via terminals in libraries or offices.